

WATERMARKS: HAJRA WAHEED'S ASYLUM IN THE SEA

It is history that serves as the point of departure in any quest for intelligibility... history may lead to anything, provided you get out of it.

-- Claude Lévi-Strauss,

La Pensée Sauvage (1961)

Lévi-Strauss once (in)famously wrote that history is a fine departure point in 'any quest for intelligibility' as long as one 'gets out of it.' But quick exit is more dangerous and more compromised than his *bon mot* suggests. In the case of empire it is really not an option.

-- Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain* (2009)

There is no asylum in the sea. No exit, nor reprieve: only an oceanic space that threatens to overwhelm us. And yet, this is what Hajra Waheed's latest body of work promises us. A suite of twenty-four works mounted to triangular wood supports, *Asylum In the Sea* suggests a paradox: of finding respite while drowning, of making a temporary home in a churning, liquid environment. Small and intimate, resembling postcards, the compositions are placed throughout the room like storyboards, encouraging us to move between and around them as we attempt to build a narrative from them. The images we first see are abstracted fields of grey dots, the visual equivalent of static noise, but on their verso we find tiny collages: maps to something that has gone missing. Black and white photographs of waves, water and occasionally sky are set onto painted grids, numbered, then annotated with simple line drawings and hand written numbers. Circles and diagrammatic arrows draw our attention to places where something once was, while the digits recall radio frequencies used to send out distress signals, or a call for help, that went unanswered. As my gaze wanders across these seascapes, I find myself looking for figures that have disappeared, but unsure I'd recognize them even if I spotted them.

This fragmented approach to narrative that plays at the edges of what can be seen is characteristic of Waheed's work, a sprawling, multimedia practice which—like the ocean itself—sometimes threatens

to subsume the viewer in the currents of its histories, both personal and collective. *Asylum In the Sea* is just one moment within a much larger story, part of an ongoing body of work titled *Sea Change* (2013–) that Waheed describes as “a visual novel” that will unfold over many years and hundreds of works. At the centre of this novel are its nine protagonists, all missing, presumed lost at sea in the course of migrating to a better life. Each chapter is devoted to a different character, with the visual and textual traces of each figure occupying one room of a gallery, turning the novel into an immersive visual diary.

In the “introduction,” the characters are shown to us in mere glimpses. *The Missed* (2012) offers us a series of nine miniature headshots: black and white photographs of Indian subjects, all men, cut and pasted onto Polaroid backs (used to hold the film in cameras) and then taped to utilitarian sheets of brown paper. The scale of the works requires that we come close, peering into the figures' faces to try to discern who they were, or how they felt before they embarked on their fatal journey. In *The Missing* (2012), the characters are further fragmented, literally truncated into sepia-toned images of torsos and arms, meticulously cut out and mounted onto sheets of archival paper that recall the pages of a nineteenth-century photo album. The format is fitting for the source material Waheed is working with; a collection of photographic postcards from the British Empire assembled in the 1930s and 40s by a friend's grandfather, the images traffic in the familiar visual language of tourist shots of India's people and places, the human figures presenting themselves to the camera as colonial “types” to be classified and collected. If we are used to thinking that photographs will disclose the truth of their subjects to us, in Waheed's hands, this promise of legibility is interrupted. As HG Masters writes of her work, “It takes some getting used to: that we might look and yet not understand.

That's what we must do, however, when we encounter Waheed's images—her collages, paintings, videos, an installation now—or however they present themselves. They refuse us. Often sweetly, and beautifully.”

But in the fragments of clothing, gestures and objects that present themselves to us, we begin

to imagine professions, romantic entanglements, national origins, and bloodlines. The first chapter, “*In The Rough*,” follows a character who seems to be an engineer or gemologist, tasked with sourcing quartz crystals to be sold to NASA and used in scientific instruments. Among his maps, aerial views of lakes and diagrams of minerals, are a series of what appear to be geological survey samples, captioned with short texts that begin in the technical language of classification, but keep slipping into the tone of intimate letters. Presented under the title *Returned* (2014), the collages suddenly become unrequited love letters, written by the first character and returned unopened by their recipient.

These intricate, continuously unfurling accounts could be fictional, but they also seem too familiar and too specific to be fabricated. History, and colonial history in particular, with its stories of home, migration, loss and disappearance, is the departure point for Waheed’s work. Her narratives, she writes, “are deeply influenced by my many lived experiences traversing borders, or rather, living among them. So many of us who live along these lines (either by choice or force) do go missing or disappear at times, just to re-emerge later.”²

But, as anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler has warned, these histories of moving through the (former) empire can saturate, leaving indelible marks, what she calls “watermarks in colonial history,” on both the past and the present. *Asylum In The Sea* makes these watermarks of colonial history visible to us, translating photographic images of the sea into watery, painted images that are both beautiful and unnerving. In many ways, this new series is a prologue to *Sea Change*’s earlier chapters: in a curious twist of temporal logic, the collages appear to be studies for works that have already been made, *Our Naufrage* and *Quell This, Swallow Me* (both 2014). Resembling photographs in both their scale and realism, these earlier paintings at first seem to be identical views of the same sea vista. As we move from work to work, however, waves shift, light shimmers and glints, and the water changes. If it is the same view of the sea that Waheed has painted, it is through a different gaze each time. But whose gaze, and which sea, remains inaccessible to us.

Asylum In The Sea explores the function of displacement and transference, both as an artistic practice and as a metaphor for the imprints that colonialism leaves on its subjects. By taking found photographic images and transferring them onto canvases to be notated and painted over, Waheed’s work suggests that representations of people at sea are imprinted with histories of migration that we cannot escape. “Watermarks are embossed on the surface and in the grain,” Stoler writes. “... they denote signatures of a history that neither can be scraped off nor removed without destroying the paper.”

More than any other work in the *Sea Change* project, *Asylum In The Sea* withholds more than it reveals, drawing us into its swirling narratives of home, longing and loss. “The aim is to provide a space for meditation rather than delivering answers,” Waheed says. “To show the stillness of the sea, in the moment in which an object is swallowed by it, by forces we can’t identify.”³ As the number of people who have been lost at sea in an attempt to seek asylum across the Mediterranean swells to the thousands, it is hard not to feel a political urgency bubble beneath Waheed’s beautiful seascapes.⁴ How these characters went missing, we will perhaps never know. All we are offered is the stuff that swallowed them up: these absent figures who went undocumented, but have left their marks on us all the same.

Gabrielle Moser

¹ HG Masters, “*Sea Change*,” exhibition essay, *Experimenta gallery*, Kolkata, India, 2013.

Hajra Waheed, interviewed by Rosalyn D’Mello, “Artist Hajra Waheed On “*Sea Change*”, her India Debut Solo,” *Blouin ARTINFO India*, <http://in.blouinartinfo.com/visual-arts/article/858124-artist-hajra-waheed-on-sea-change-her-india-debut-solo#sthash.IEo2RI7W.dpuf>, accessed May 31, 2015.

² Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2009), 8.

³ Interview with the artist, May 22, 2015.

⁴ “Europe’s boat people: The EU’s policy on maritime refugees has gone disastrously wrong,” *The Economist online*, April 25, 2015, <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21649465-eus-policy-maritime-refugees-has-gone-disastrously-wrong-europes-boat-people>, accessed June 1, 2015.